

Douglas Kahn, Cage & Phonography

Cage at Wesleyan Symposium, Middletown, Conn.

27 February 1988

My talk this morning will be critical; it will not be within the celebratory and explanatory mode that has characterized this symposium over the past week. I will, at another time, better situate my remarks relative to my respect for Cage's work. It is the great luxury of this symposium, where people have a wide-ranging familiarity with Cage and the appreciation such familiarity invites, to have the option not to do so.

I would be grateful if my remarks are understood to be well within the tradition of Cage's own earlier critical practices, for I will be, as you may detect as the paper proceeds, assuming many of Cage's own impulses, if not precepts, as my own. His critique of Varese is relevant in this respect.¹ Cage said Varese can be lauded for making available all sounds for music but must be critiqued for the various impositions to which he subjected those sounds instead of "letting sounds be themselves." My comments loosely parallel these but instead are applied to Cage and contain a few other differences. Whereas according to Cage, Varese's imposition took place primarily at the moment of organization of sound, Cage's imposition occurs at the level of sound itself. Also, Cage's critique of Varese came from within music, mine comes from outside music, from phonography.

By phonography I mean all mechanical, optical, electrical and digital means of sound recording, with the exception of the music box and other such contraptions. Phonography ranges over all auditory objects, except inner speech. The problem with almost all discussions about phonography to date is that they limit their object to music. There are presently other discussions with the goal of developing an art phonography with no such limitation. Development of an art phonography is practically inevitable. It is, after all, something of an historical oddity that art photography is commonplace while there is nothing in sound of commensurate status. We're simply talking about recording the objects of the two major senses, vision and hearing, what Cage calls the "public senses."

The attractiveness of art phonography results from being an unexplored domain in the midst of a general artistic exhaustion. Why the early avant-garde, during which the groundwork was laid for today's artforms, passed phonography over can be attributed to a number of technological, institutional and discursive reasons. The most powerful discursive obstacle has been the equation of an artistic practice of sound with music. This equation is traceable from Luigi Russolo before WWI through Cage who revitalized it after WWII. Cage's influence in this respect has remained vital over subsequent years because his musical aesthetic itself has yet to be superseded. He has, so to speak, filled music up. After Cage there are no sounds which cannot be music and the very existence of music itself no longer depends upon artistic intention or any other attribute of human volition, except the will to attune to aural phenomena. As a consequence, other excursions in theoretical music since Cage have proven either repetitious or conservative, and questioning conducted along musical lines has failed to find fault.

Phonography provokes another mode of inquiry quite different from music. It begins with a different scrutiny of the composition of sound, its full materiality of signification and not just its sonic content or invocatory role. This shift at the material level requires a reformulation of the composition with sound and also resituates the composer socially. With respect to the topic at hand, phonography provides an opportunity to question some of Cage's central precepts.

In 1939 Cage used test-tone recordings for Imaginary Landscape No. 1. This simulated an electronic instrument and was not too concerned with sound recording per se. He became interested in phonography proper after meeting Pierre Schaeffer in Paris in the late-40s. This resulted several years later in Williams Mix (1952), produced as part of the Music for Magnetic Tape project, a project also engaging David Tudor, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown and Morton Feldman. Williams Mix consists of minutely spliced pieces of magnetic audiotape taken from a stock of 500-600 recorded sounds in six categories: city sounds; country sounds; electronic sounds; manually-produced sounds, including the literature of music; wind-produced sounds, including songs; and small sounds requiring

amplification to be heard with the others. It runs at 15 ips on eight tracks deployed spatially and lasts around 4-1/4 minutes.

If you are not familiar with this work, it should be obvious that whatever associative properties the recorded sounds might have once possessed were almost entirely obliterated. Familiarity with this work usually comes from its inclusion on the 25-Year Retrospective album. In the album's notes Cage writes:

Since the pioneer work of Pierre Schaeffer at the Radio Diffusion of Paris in 1948, the making of tape music has become international. (The different approaches of the various world centers -- Paris, Cologne, Milan, New York are excellently set forth in an article by Roger Maren in The Reporter, issue of Oct. 6, 1955, pages 38-42.)

Looking at Maren article that Cage recommended so enthusiastically, we find an interesting tripartite categorization. One category pertains to work where tape is used but nothing radical is attempted, e.g., Luening and Ussachevsky. More to the point, however, is the categorical wedge driven between Schaeffer's musique concrète and Cage's work.² Because "the strong referential significance attached to certain noises" have not been sufficiently eradicated, Schaeffer's musique concrète is thus -

closer to cubist poetry than to music.....This does not necessarily nullify the value of the work. It simply places the work outside the domain of pure music.

In the third category, Cage's work, as well as the tape work of Messiaen, Boulez and Varèse, qualifies as pure music because recorded sounds are "manipulated to the point where they lose all referential significance. The composer's interest is in the sound itself and the patterns into which it can be formed."

In other words, on the occasion of a major release of his work, Cage accedes to the view that musique concrète is not really musical. In many other instances, of course, he not only understands musique concrète as musical but perhaps too musical. For instance he later indicts Schaeffer for simulating solfeggio by

imposing a 12-tiered taxonomy upon the expanse of sound, among other instances of compositional imposition. In terms of their own statements and actions, however, Cage and Schaeffer were in essential agreement for they both practiced a musicalization of sound, a phenomenon which began its tenure in the avant-garde with Luigi Russolo in 1913. From the beginnings of musique concrète in the late-1940s Schaeffer consistently conformed to this tradition through his notion of acousmatics.³ Cage actually pre-empted Schaeffer when in 1942 he urged that work with phonographs and optical sound film be carried out while keeping a sound's "expressive rather than representational qualities in mind..."⁴

The post-war reception of the phonographic work of Cage and of musique concrète, i.e., phonography's first incursion into Western art music and all the attendant imperatives it presented, demonstrated an uncanny resemblance to the first incursion of noise into the Western avant-garde with Russolo. Commentators took recourse to mimetic figures in the absence of any such figures explicitly purveyed within the music. This is of course the case of much writing on music, where metaphor is invoked for the purposes of description, celebration or invective; e.g., as Slonimsky tells us in his Lexicon of Musical Invective, Bartok's Fourth String Quartet was once described as "the singular alarmed noise of poultry being worried to death by a Scotch terrier." Music with one foot already in the door of the world sat up and begged this tenor of comment. A writer in Newsweek (11 January 1954) described a sound in Williams Mix as "like a fly walking on paper, magnified." Ezra Pound likened one of Russolo's works to a "mimetic representation of dead cats in a fog horn"⁵ while the London Times (16 June 1914) said, "it rather resembled the sounds heard in the rigging of a Channel-steamer during a bad crossing." It should be remembered, especially when talking about Cage, that not only the non-descript machinations of noise but silence too has historically been open to all type of descriptions.

Interrogations by composers and other specialists were also sensitive to the line drawn between sounds. Varèse invoked a battle against imitation to domesticate Russolo's ideas in order to situate his own "liberation of sound" more securely within Western art music. At one point, Stockhausen (Die Reihe V) valorized electronic sounds over "all instrumental or other auditive associations. Such

associations divert the listener's comprehension from the self-evidence of the sound-world presented to him because he thinks of bells, organs, birds or faucets." Stuckenschmidt ended a description of musique concrète with the following observation.

[The phenomenal power of musique concrète] lies in its capacity to change any tone, sound, or noise so that the initial form is no longer recognizable. It is a technique of metamorphosis with results no less astonishing than the ancient metamorphoses of mythology described by Ovid, such as the transformation of a nymph into a laurel tree.
(Musical Quarterly, January 1963)

The fact is, read music theory and locate where imitation, representation, mimesis, whatever it may be called, is negotiated. Whether you look at Pierre Boulez, Milton Babbitt, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Hans Werner Henze, Trevor Wishart, Alan Durant, Evan Eisenberg, Roger Scruton, Marvin Minsky, Peter Kivy, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Attali, Roger Reynolds, Schaeffer or Cage or whomever, it doesn't matter. While the sanctified question of musical representation may be indisposable in policing the boundaries of music, it is something of a non-question among the strategies of proliferation and semic mobility available to a developing arts of sound. Any demarcation set up by musical discourse is important only to the extent that it exists as an item on an itinerary, that it exists to be problematized and subverted, not a locale from which to beat a retreat. (On this count, postmodern scenarios that took recourse to musical figures as a model of the play of representation or deterritorialization should reconsider.)

An area of music's relationship to worldly sound that is especially relevant to Cage is where music is constructed by an act of apperception, instead of one of performance. (I use the word "apperception" because it sheds neither cognition nor sociality as readily as "perception" with its scientific and naturalistic codings.) The classic example is, of course, 4'33" where the piano is muted to musicalize sound (of course, this does not the represent the full dimension of the piece; nothing really does). There are also the many encouragements by Cage to take such a disposition outside of the confines of a musical venue, and such imperatives may

in fact come about by other means. In reviewing the recording of Variations IV, a writer in the Saturday Review (30 April 1966) first listed the myriad of sounds invoked:

...snatches of Schubert, telephone bells, jazz, Christmas carols, traffic noises, static, a receding train, a Mexican tune, comments - "Is this the first time you have loved?" - Moussorgsky and other operatic bits, sound effects, wild screams, Chopin....[etc.]

In this instance, and in many similar pieces of collage and pastiche, contemporary versions of quotation and quodlibet that they are, what is being invoked is invocation itself. Whatever associative and meaningful characteristics any one sound might possess are subjected to the self-referential operations of music. The possible shift to a self-referentiality of the object invoked, to its own universe of associations, which would in fact scuttle self-referentiality, is never undertaken, the conceptual leads to do so never provided.

The writer from Saturday Review then relates how he took his experience of Variations IV into everyday life.

While caught in a massive traffic jam on New York's East River Drive, I thought of Cage. On my car radio I caught bits of Parsifal interrupted by static, news broadcasts and rock-'n-roll smothered in engine sounds from nearby cars, the roar of traffic, boat whistles, and other assorted noise. Cage came to mind at once.

This resonates with Russolo's prescription for the musical flaneur in his 1913 manifesto "The Art of Noises."

We shall amuse ourselves by orchestrating in our minds the noise of the metal shutters of store windows, the slamming of doors, the bustle and shuffle of crowds, the multitudinous uproar of railroad stations, forges, mills, printing presses, power stations, and underground railways.⁶

Russolo here suggests a fairly active operation of apperception. It clearly denotes a musicalization of sound. Cage would neither promote such an "orchestrating in our minds" nor would he want his name to "come to mind at once." He would nevertheless suggest that we hear these sounds as music. The music in this case would conform to aesthetics of Cagean music which, as attested by this symposium, is music secured against detractors. Cage has simply repeated Russolo's main tactic, wherein noise serves as both a ticket to the world and a foil against musical convention. Noise becomes the elastic separation needed to realize a renovation of music or, as Russolo the painter coming from the outside said, a great renovation of music. However, once noise is claimed for music it begins to lose its prior transgressive function. It thus becomes instrumental in both senses of the word. Noise's prior function does not become lost, but is instead replaced by another inhibition, one which had existed before but was even less thinkable. For Cage, reference is the new noise.

In sum, what Cage does is music. Why should he be indicted for something he doesn't do? I am not being critical of his music. Critique is merited, however, each time he collapses sound and musical sound. This is, of course, at the crux of his aesthetic and thus impinges upon other central aspects. For instance, the musical reduction of sound relies upon a un-Cagean act of imposition. It contradicts his anti-egoism, to the extent that the ego is socially constituted, and it contradicts the anti-anthropomorphism, to the extent that music is a social figure, even when it is invoked during attunement. When he says....

Music, as I conceive it, is ecological. You could go further and say that it IS ecology.⁷

...an imposition is occurring. Consequently, as ecology itself can stand practically and theoretically as our relationship to nature, we may ask what representations are presupposed and what impositions occur in a statement like: "...to imitate nature in the manner of her operation." Within this statement on the basic role of the artist, I believe you will find a key to his politics and to other concerns of his art.

1 John Cage, "Edgard Varese" in Silence. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961.

2 It should be remembered that Schaeffer's first musique concrète work was carried out on disc-lathes and turntables, not on magnetic audio tape.

3 In a recent interview (Re Records Quarterly Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 1987) he totally discounted the possibility of using anything outside of conventional musical sounds. "It took me forty years to conclude that nothing is possible outside DoReMi..." During a conversation when I told him of Schaeffer's current belief that there is no music besides "do-re-mi," Cage replied, "He should have kept going up the scale."

4 John Cage, "For More New Sounds" in John Cage, edited by Richard Kostelanetz. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.

5 Ezra Pound, Ezra Pound and Music, edited by R. Murray Schafer. New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 253.

6 Luigi Russolo, "The Art of Noises" in Michael Kirby and Victoria Kirby, Futurist Performance, translation by Victoria Kirby. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971.

7 John Cage in conversation with Daniel Charles, For the Birds. Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981, p. 229.